

Mountains : back to its tourist roots

Autor(en): **Bamert, Franz**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **29 (2002)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **23.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906579>

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Gesellschaft für ökologische Forschung/Sylvia Hamberger

From natural phenomenon to consumer product.

Back to its tourist roots

FRANZ BAMERT

In the global competition for visitors, Switzerland wants to play its trump card: Nature. By and large, this ploy is succeeding.

„Those crazy English.“ This is what 19th-century residents of the Bernese Oberland and Grisons must have thought to themselves, though perhaps not voiced aloud. This was the age when rich travellers from “across the sea” came to our country and were the first to conquer Swiss peaks. Local residents were leery of the high Alps, and above all saw no point in climbing them.

Around 1830 the first roads and railways were built for these discerning guests, and luxurious hostleries sprang up by the lakes and in the mountains. But, apart from local farmers selling their produce to hotels, there was little or no contact between the locals and the mostly foreign visitors. At the turn of the last century the Hotel Jungfrau-Eggishorn on Fiescheralp, 2200 meters above sea level, offered ten different brands

of champagne, while local residents had to make do on milk rice, potatoes and cheese, as Thomas Antonietti relates in his book *Bauern - Bergführer - Hoteliers* (“Farmers – Alpine Guides – Hoteliers”).

An important branch

Who would have thought then that Swiss tourism would grow to be an important branch of the economy? Nowadays tourism in Switzerland brings in over CHF 20 billion a year, accounts for five percent of the gross national product, and provides 300,000 jobs. Highly tourist-oriented cantons like the Grisons earn every second franc either directly or indirectly from their visitors.

Yet there is another side to the coin. Switzerland has been building tourist facilities since World War Two, covering almost every mountain with cable railways and ski lifts. Until 20 or 30 years ago, everything was going well. Then the first effects of global climate warming began to show, as the snow line increasingly receded to higher altitudes. But customers from around the world do not come to relatively expensive Switzerland for a balmy climate and palm trees when these can be found at much less cost by the Mediterranean. What they want is ski slopes with guaranteed snow. So, 25 years ago, the

race began to upgrade facilities. The magic word was and is snow canons. The first canon was installed in Appenzell’s Urnäsch in 1976, rapidly followed by more around the country. Now some 135 cable railways operate such snow canons, and a large number of companies have invested in these and other facilities. Peter Vollmer, President of the Swiss Cable Railway Association, gives only a third of the railways a genuine chance of survival. The situation is similar in the hotel sector. According to a recent statement by Fluregn Fravi, head of Gastro Grisons, “Many businesses are operating at only 50 percent or less of their capacity. In other words: we have enormous surplus capacity and in order to create a healthy market, 25 or 30 percent of the businesses have to close down.” The same is true of Valais and the Bernese Oberland.

Rediscovering nature

Particularly in the Grisons, over-commercialisation of the last alpine valley has been opposed by local groups, who exposed themselves to vituperative abuse in the process. Now, even the most hardened supporter of commercialisation is realising that there is no income to be had from an alpine world covered in concrete. So Swiss tourists are returning to their roots and rediscovering unspoiled landscapes. A study on ecotourism commissioned by the State Secretariat for the Economy (seco) comes to an astonishing conclusion: “With revenues of CHF 2.3 billion and visitors resident in Switzerland accounting for 30 percent of →

Additional reading

www.myswitzerland.com, www.wwf.ch, www.naturfreunde.ch, www.pronatura.ch, www.umwelt-schweiz.ch.

The seco study can be consulted at www.ftl.hsr.ch.


Thomas Antonietti: *Bauern – Bergführer – Hoteliers*, pub. Hier + Jetzt.

Various authors: *Heimat verkaufen*, pub. Weltwoche.

Dominik Siegrist: *Winterspuren – Unterwegs in bedrohter Landschaft*, pub. Rotpunkt.

tourists, eco-tourism is an important element of domestic tourism." An additional financial potential of 10 to 40 percent is estimated over the next ten years. With this in mind, the government is supporting initiatives to create landscape parks, biosphere reserves and similar projects, and is in the process of designing a seal of quality for eco-tourism. Willy Geiger, Vice Director of the Federal Office for Environment, Forests and Landscape, is convinced that "The planned labelling system for natural and

landscape parks will provide better information on Switzerland's tourist offerings". The government plans to recognise only nature parks which are based on regional initiatives and enjoy cantonal support. The hallmarks of eco-tourism are: regional added value, promotion of public transport, care and preservation of ecologically fragile regions, and unique offerings. Yet at least some environmentalists are sceptical, and worry that this will launch a tourist onslaught on the last vestiges of unspoiled natural landscape.

Jürg Schmid, Director of the Swiss Tourist Board, disagrees: "On the contrary. The trend is in a different direction. According to the findings of the seco study, everyone now understands how important it is to keep Nature intact. Unspoiled landscapes are the basic capital for the entire sector. So we must and will do everything to protect it." 

Translated from the German

Our Alps are at risk

PABLO CRIVELLI


Greenhouse effect, mass tourism and road traffic pollution are threatening a globally unique ecosystem. People, too, are suffering.

IMAGINE IF, in another fifty years, Swiss glaciers were nothing but a memory, or a gigantic landslide had buried the Grisons community of Pontresina and erased it from the map. These are no futuristic hypotheses, but scenarios projected by experts concerned about the future of the Alps. Their prognosis is bleak, and they place the blame for endangering this ecosystem squarely on Man.

While the effects of human activity on nature used to be moderate, the situation changed dramatically in the last decades of the 20th century. Mass tourism and increased strain on the environment (including noise pollution) caused by the transit of international goods traffic through the Alps are inexorably taking their toll on the health of a globally unique habitat – a region which is home to thousands of flora and fauna, some of which are threatened with extinction. Yet it is not only insects and plants that are at risk. Noise and environmental pollution are also directly affecting human health.

Some risks are less evident but just as real nonetheless. Permafrost, the permanent

layer of frost which covers at least five percent of Switzerland's territory and for centuries has protected alpine communities from landslides, is slowly melting. This phenomenon is attributable to global warming caused by the rise in CO₂ emissions from industrial activity, motorised traffic and heating systems. This pollutant is also responsible for the marked regression of Swiss glaciers, clearly visible to the naked eye. The most pessimistic forecasts predict that Swiss glaciers may disappear by 2050–2100, resulting in unforeseeable consequences to humans and the economy.

After much resistance, therefore, the residents of Pontresina decided to build a protective wall on the slopes above the village. The growing instability of slopes due to melting permafrost, coupled with the lower frequency and greater intensity of rainfalls (another "secondary" consequence of climate warming), could send parts of the mountain sliding down to the valley floor. The risk is not immediate and has never yet become a reality. But it is better to prepare for it in good time. 

Translated from the German.



The mountain reflected by the modern world.